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Poetry, politics, and power

"Repito: una historia rutinaria. La mediocridad tomó el poder."

[I repeat: a routine story. Mediocrity took power.]

(Subirats 55)

Many might consider poetry to be culturally insignificant in the contemporary period. Although the audience for the genre remains relatively small, it could easily be demonstrated that more Spaniards purchase and read books of poetry now than in previous decades. The problem, in my view at least, lies elsewhere: despite modest gains in readership, poetry remains the genre most heavily dependent on "cultural capital." In a climate that increasingly privileges market forces over seemingly outmoded notions of literary quality or prestige, poetry is bound to seem diminished in stature. Yet the genre apparently retains enough of its lustre to be a prize worth squabbling over: debates between warring factions of poets have become particularly acrimonious in the past twenty years, and the ensuing controversy has larger implications for Spanish literary culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To understand what is at stake in these "guerrillas poéticas" it is necessary to put aside close reading for a moment and look at the larger cultural context. In this article I would like to explore the way in which a particular school of poetry, the so-called

'poesía de la experiencia', has achieved quasi-official status in post-Franco Spain, to the detriment of other creative options. What is particularly fascinating about this process is the way in which political, educational, and literary institutions converge in order to overdetermine the premature canonization of this poetic school. While close literary analysis is indispensable in the study of poetry, and for very good reasons, my focus here will be on the seemingly extraneous factors that help to explain the success of this school.<sup>i</sup>

What exactly is the 'poetry of experience'? The phrase has its origin in Robert Langbaum's The Poetry of Experience, a study of the dramatic monologue in nineteenth-century English poetry. This book fell into the hands of Spanish poets of the 1950s (especially Jaime Gil de Biedma) who admired the dramatic monologues of Luis Cernuda. Beginning in the 1980s, a group of young, mostly Andalusian poets revived the idea of a 'poetry of experience' in order to define their own aesthetic stance. While the poets of the 1950s were reacting against the less complex aesthetic of "social poetry," the new poets of the 1980s, especially Luis García Montero, directed their hostility to the supposed excesses of the novísimos of the 1970s. Although Gil de Biedma is a highly innovative poet, in his historical context, the attempt to return to the aesthetics of the 1950s after the novísimos acquires a decidedly reactionary cast. The basic tenet underlying García Montero's stance is that the literary avant-garde has been a historical failure.

Since this article does not deal directly with the poetry of writers like García Montero, Jon Juaristi, or Felipe Benítez Reyes, it runs the risk of overgeneralizing. While

in my opinion no single poet from this tendency is unquestionably great, it would be unfair to paint them all with the same brush. García Montero writes mostly about personal experiences, which "are generally produced by remembrances of places and events from the persona's past" (Debicki, *Twentieth-Century Spanish Poetry*, 203). Juaristi is best known for his caustic commentaries on the situation in the Basque country. Benítez Reyes, who has made two appearances in this book so far, is perhaps the most talented writer of the group, a master of intertextual parody. While I have myself been identified as a harsh critic of the "Poetry of Experience," my major objection is to the idea that it represents a salutary normalization of Spanish poetry in the 1980s. I object, not to Benítez Reyes's poetry, which I quite enjoy, but to García Montero's reactionary defence of this poetry and the accompanying attacks on the *novísimos* of the 1970s. García Montero himself is a clever and talented writer, and those who enjoy his poetry are entitled to their own taste. Once again, my principal argument is with the notion that this sort of writing is the only valid option for the contemporary Spanish poet, that it is a historical necessity to reject that avant-garde and write like García Montero.

Although the "Poetry of Experience" is more aligned with the left than with the right, it encompasses politically conservative poets as well. It would be a mistake, however, to take a poet's professed ideology at face-value. For Antonio Gamoneda, the political significance of this school has more to do with institutional power than with ideology per se:

Más claramente: entiendo que este sector de la poesía española presenta concordancia con las formas de poder del posfranquismo, ya sean éstas de corte socialdemócrata, escoradamente centrista o llanamente derechista. El caso es que los premios oficiales y oficiosos, los medios de comunicación, las editoriales relacionadas con ministerios y corporaciones, los libros de texto "recomendables" y los editados con dinero público, los críticos que quieren "hacer carrera" y en sus poses, los propios jefes de gobierno, es decir, la práctica totalidad de los poderes capaces de suscitar popularidad, consumo y, en modesta medida, atributos de una especie de star-system, suelen preferir a estos poetas "inteligibles" que yo considero minirrealistas.

(Gamoneda, "Poesía española," 26-7; emphasis in original)

[More clearly stated: I understand that this sector of Spanish poetry is consonant with the form of power of Postfrancoism, whether these are social-democratic, plainly centrist, or obviously rightist. The case is that the official (and officious) prizes, the communications media, publishing houses associated with ministries and corporations, "recommended" textbooks and those edited with state funds, critics who want to "make a career," and, in their poses, the very heads of the government, in other words, practically the sum total of all the powers capable of producing popularity, consumption, and, in a modest degree, a kind of star-system,

usually prefer poets who are "intelligible" and whom I consider "mini-realists."]

There are at least two points worth emphasizing in this remarkable declaration. In the first place, Gamoneda does not condemn this school of poetry for its ostensible ideological affiliations, which, in fact, seem extraordinarily fluid. As the use of the subjunctive mood suggests, it almost does not matter whether these "forms of power" belong to left, right or center: what these poets share is a desire to achieve institutional status, to become canonized as the official Spanish poets of the period. The other point is that these institutions themselves, whether they be of right, left, or center, all converge to support the same sort of poetry, based on the twin principles of realism and intelligibility. It is worth noting that Gamoneda's essay appeared in La Alegría de los Naufragios, a literary journal that brings together poets, philosophers, and critics who oppose the dominance of the "Poetry of Experience."

Gamoneda's description appears almost paranoid in its description of multiple institutions converging to lend their stamp of approval to this poetic movement: even "los jefes del gobierno" are in on the plot! Yet such a confluence of power is not at all implausible on its face. Close ties among Spanish journalists, academics, writers, critics, and politicians are the rule rather than the exception. Two prominent poets, Jon Juaristi and Luis Alberto de Cuenca, have been appointed to high positions by the Aznar Government, but their cases are merely the most obvious. Nor is there any need to posit a well-planned conspiracy to promote this poetic school: in fact, this sort of poetry perfectly embodies the cultural aspirations and policies of the Spanish government

during the period in question.

The PSOE Government of Felipe González promoted the triumphalist idea of a forward-looking and thoroughly 'European' Spain. While renouncing Marxist ideology and rushing to join NATO and the European Union, it wanted to be perceived as leftist, since it still needed to distinguish itself from the post-Franco Right of the AP (later PP). The writers most useful to the Felipe González regime, then, would be those professing a sentimental allegiance to the left while promoting the idea of a poetry written in an intelligible manner for 'normal' citizens of a democratic society. The poet of the moment, by this logic, would be Luis García Montero, the de facto leader of the 'poetry of experience'.

Gamoneda, in the article cited above, associates this new "realism" with the 'socialist realism' of the 1950s:

En definitiva, creo que los poetas españoles jóvenes localizables en este "campo" situándose en una tradición débil – valga otra vez el adjetivo –, configuran un difuso y diverso minirrealismo, que bien pudiera ser al liberalismo de mercado y al neocapitalismo lo que el realismo socialista, igualmente estéril y académico, fue al comunismo institucionalizado en los que se llamaron "países del Este."

(Gamoneda, "Poesía española," 26; emphasis in original)

[Definitively, I believe that those young Spanish poets localizable in this "field" situating itself in a weak tradition – once again let that adjective

stand – comprise a diffuse and diverse mini-realism, that well might be to market neo-liberalism and neo-capitalism what socialist realism, an equally sterile and academic movement, was to institutionalized Communism in the so-called "Eastern Countries."]

The comparison is apt in several respects: socialist realism was, of course, the official literary doctrine of the culturally conservative Communist Party, both in the Eastern Bloc and in Western European countries of the cold-war era. In twentieth-century literature, "realism" tends to be the preferred vehicle for the imposition of a particular ideologically correct vision of reality. The poets of the 1980s, moreover, find a model for a social realism close at hand. Spanish poetry of the 1950s, especially that written by Communist Party members or fellow travellers like Ángel González and Jaime Gil de Biedma, provides the immediate model for Luis García Montero and other poets of his school. These earlier poets, of course, cannot be defined solely in terms of realism: their value lies in the way in which they were able to transcend the tenets of social poetry, as defined by older Communist Party poets like Blas de Otero and Gabriel Celaya. What is relevant from my perspective, however, is that García Montero and his group tend to value Spanish poets of the 1950s for their realism rather than for their attempts to go beyond it.

The Partido Popular Government of José María Aznar (1996-2003) promoted policies somewhat similar to the PSOE in the realm of culture. While it has favored more ideologically conservative writers, the same principles of realism and intelligibility still hold sway. Jon Juaristi, better known now for his essays on Basque nationalism than for

his poetry, passed from the Biblioteca Nacional to the directorship of the Instituto Cervantes, the institution charged with promoting Spanish culture abroad. What is interesting from my perspective is that Juaristi's views of poetry do not differ substantially from those of Luis García Montero and other poets associated with the vague leftism of the PSOE Government. At the same time, however, it is difficult to know whether this support for a particular concept of culture forms part of a larger plan or simply the result of inertia. One would need to study the cultural policies of the PP in much greater detail in order to draw firmer conclusions. In fact, more rigorous accounts of the cultural policies of the Socialists would also be helpful in sorting through these questions. In the absence of such studies, I have had to rely a good deal on anecdotal evidence.

Critical arguments that turn poetry into a mere "symptom" of a larger political and cultural movement can be reductive, to say the least. In this case, however, the relation is relatively transparent: the poets themselves justify their poetics by appealing to political bywords like "normalization" and "Europeanization." Whether explicitly or implicitly, they argue that their work exemplifies the democratic and European character of post-Franco Spain. These arguments have had the intended effect of conferring an aura of historical inevitability or naturalness onto the ascent of the "Poetry of Experience." Indeed, supporters of this school scoff at the notion that has been any attempt to exclude other sorts of poetry from the public arena. The anthology El sindicato del crimen was published with the explicit intent of parodying, and thus defusing, the widespread criticism of this group of poets as a well-organized literary



mafia. Supporters of the "Poetry of Experience" also point to the fact that poets representing opposing tendencies have also published books and won prizes during this period. Even so, no one on either side of the debate denies the ascent of this school to quasi-official status during the 1980s and 1990s.

In my view, the "Poetry of Experience" could only have achieved such a degree of success in a cultural climate favourable to a new model of the writer-intellectual as servant to the cultural policies of the state.<sup>ii</sup> The paradigm dominant in the 1960s and 70s, according to which the intellectual was called upon to embody a spirit of fierce independence, was rooted in avant-garde principles. This is not to say that all, or even most, writers were vanguardists during this period. The idea, rather, was that intellectuals had the duty to take political and artistic stands rooted in their own integrity as writers, ignoring both institutional power and the literary marketplace. There is much to criticize in this paradigm: as many before me have pointed out, it is inherently elitist and is often associated with the taking of seemingly arrogant or intransigent positions. One can also criticize the particular political choices adopted by many intellectuals during this period. The French (and Spanish) flirtation with Maoism in the 1970s seems especially foolish. Still, it is easy to see the contrast between the intellectual substance of José Ángel Valente or Juan Goytisolo (neither of whom was ever a Maoist) and the new model of the writer promoted since the 1980s. Subirats has defined this new model in the following terms: "Con todo eso, por formato social se generó un nuevo tipo de intelectual no definido tanto por su conocimiento o sus contenidos, ni garantizado por una crítica y diálogos por lo demás inexistentes, sino más

bien diseñado como imagen" (Subirats 1993: 97) [As a consequence, by social format a new category of intellectuals was generated, defined not by their knowledge or contents, nor guaranteed by a critique and a dialogue that did not exist anyway, but rather designed as an image.]<sup>iii</sup>

Félix de Azúa, a poet and novelist who came to prominence with the publication of Castellet's Nueve novísimos in 1970, has a particularly illuminating perspective on this transition, since he has, by his own admission, been an avant-garde poet, a Maoist, and a writer of both experimental and realist fiction. The experimental novel of the 1970s, generally held to be unreadable, became obsolete with the death of Franco:

Llevados por el impulso de nuestra indudable vocación europea, muchos escritores decidimos [...] ayudar a nuestros colegas continentales a mejor comprender la literatura española mediante el bonito procedimiento de escribir novelas comprensibles; sobre todo, comprensibles para un francés, un belga, un suizo, en fin, un hombre radicalmente normal [...] Era difícil, pero ¿no veíamos a nuestros amigos trotskistas y estalinistas y anarquistas haciendo de subsecretarios generales técnicos? ¿Íbamos nosotros a ser menos? Era difícil, pero estábamos dispuestos a todo, incluso a no ser experimentales.

(Azúa, El aprendizaje de la decepción, 217)

[Carried along by the impulse of our undeniably European calling, many of us writers decided to help our continental colleagues to better understand

Spanish literature by the pleasant procedure of writing comprehensible novels; above all, comprehensible to a Frenchman, a Belgian, a Swiss, that is, a radically normal man. It was difficult, but weren't we seeing our Trotskyite and Stalinist and Anarchist friends becoming "general technical undersecretaries"? Were we going to be left behind? It was difficult, but were will willing to do anything, even to stop being experimental.]

Azúa's analogy, though highly questionable, is quite transparent: experimental writing is to realist, "comprehensible" fiction as revolutionary politics is to run-of-the-mill government bureaucracy in a democratic society. The revolutionary becomes a technocrat, just as the avant-garde writer turns to bland, conventional fiction., Luis García Montero argues along the same lines in his introduction to the poetry of Felipe Benítez Reyes. Indeed, the argument about the unreadability of the experimental novel of the 1970s is identical, in form and substance, to the attacks on the novísimos undertaken by García Montero and his group. This line of thinking has always seemed questionable to me, in any case. There are experimental novels of variable quality: if no Spanish writer of the period wrote a novel comparable to Rayuela, it is not because the experimental novel itself is doomed to failure. Azúa himself has written interesting, if not brilliant, novels of both types. His earlier, denser novels like Las lecciones de Jena retain a certain interest. His later works of fiction are perhaps more readable, but have less intellectual substance.

Azúa goes on to discuss his own aims as a novelist in the following terms:

La segunda de mis intenciones es cultivar una artesanía, la novela, cuya dignidad se funda en la acertada y exacta relación de los juegos del sexo y del dinero, es decir, la acertada y exacta significación de las figuras de la historia. Y la tercera de mis intenciones es cultivar esa artesanía a semejanza de nuestros ahora ya inevitables compañeros europeos, sin pretensiones nacionales, sin pretensiones provinciales, sin pretensiones locales, con la neutra, monótona, rutinaria, modesta, pero excelente capacidad laboral de un buen conductor de autobuses holandés o de un ginecólogo suizo.

(Azúa 218)

[The second of my aim is to cultivate a craft, that of the novel, whose worthiness is founded on the accurate and precise relationships in the games of sex and money, in other words, on the accurate and precise signification of the figures of the plot. And the third of my aims is to cultivate this craft in the same way as our now inevitable European colleagues, with no national pretentions, no provincial pretentions, no local pretentions, with the neutral, monotonous, routine, modest, but excellent capacity for work of a good Dutch bus-driver or Swiss gynocologist.]

The idea of "normality," associated with comparatively prosperous continental nations, rings strangely hollow here. The notion seems to be that Spain, as a fully-fledged member of the European Union, should produce a literature that is "European" in the

most generic (that is, the least specific) possible sense of the word. Azúa, however, offers no concrete reason why this literature should be emulated. His own adjectives, in fact, make the culture of Northern Europe sound mind-numbingly dull ("neutra, monótona, rutinaria, modesta"), and one has the sense that he does not have in mind any particular literary tradition in Belgium, Switzerland, or the Netherlands. (I would suspect that very few writers from these "minor" literatures are well-known to European readers generally.) His entire line of thinking begs several questions: Is a generically European literature necessarily more interesting or vital than Latin American or North African Literature? Why would a Dane or an Austrian choose to read a Spanish novel that is indistinguishable from a Norwegian or Dutch novel? Indeed, how does a literature that seems to come from no place at all stake any claim at all to the reader's attention?

In fairness to Félix de Azúa, it should be noted that few writers are as brutally self-critical as the author of such novels as Historia de un idiota contado por él mismo and Diario de un hombre humillado, both of which feature self-abasing first-person narrators. If Azúa's observations in the paragraph quoted above are perfectly self-refuting, then, the effect is surely intentional. One of his aims is to demystify literature, making it sound as banal as bus-driving. In so doing, however, he lampoons this demystification through a reductio ad absurdum. These observations do reflect a prevalent attitude in literary circles, even if Azúa himself cannot assert them without irony. The dichotomy he sets up, between a stereotypical Spanish costumbrismo – "las sórdidas historias de costureras y farmacéuticos en pequeños pueblos de provincias pobres" (Azúa 1996: 217) [the sordid stories of seamstresses and pharmacists in small

villages of impoverished provinces] – and an equally unexciting European culture, is, of course, profoundly misleading. It is essentially a choice between two equally unappealing caricatures. This impasse comes about as the logical result of the so-called “desacralization” of literature: if the writer is no longer the repository of any special prestige, then he (or she) will be cast as low-level political/cultural bureaucrat, a kind of “subsecretario general técnico” of literature.

Of course, the idea that Northern European literature is of necessity bland and colorless is itself the product of an unexamined and tenacious stereotype: the Romantic-era dichotomy between the underdeveloped but impassioned Mediterranean and the cold, Protestant North. This hoary opposition, which also underlies Azúa’s comic contrast between the ardent revolutionary and the routinized bureaucrat, still surfaces in Spanish novels of the 1980s, like Esther Tusquets’s El mismo mar de todos los veranos and Carme Riera’s Cuestión de amor propio. To make Spain “European” one must have some first-hand acquaintance with European culture itself. A reliance on cultural stereotyping is a symptom of a profound lack of first-hand knowledge. As Eduardo Subirats argues:

Otra cosa no había: no ha existido una recepción amplia y crítica del pensamiento europeo, no ha existido un real intercambio de ideas, no ha existido una verdadera información sobre la historia, las culturas y las sociedades europeas de hoy. Europa se convertía progresivamente en un emblema vacío en la misma medida en que se cerraban las puertas a otras posibilidades de intercambio, participación y comunicación. (Subirats 83-4)

[There was nothing else: there has not been a broad and critical reception of European thought, there has not been a real interchange of idea, there has not been true information about the history, the cultures, and the societies of contemporary Europe. Europe was progressively becoming an empty emblem, to the extent that the doors were being closed to other possibilities of interchange, participation, and communication.]

Azúa's spurious appeal to European normality (exemplified by the Dutch bus-driver and the Swiss gynecologist) perfectly illustrates Subirats's idea of Europe as an "emblema vacío." One thinks of the fatuous Miguel in Riera's Cuestión de amor propio who plans to write a series of superficial articles on Scandinavia in hopes of currying favor with the Nobel Prize Committee. Elena Delgado makes a similar point in a somewhat different context: "the constant invocations to 'Europeanness,' modernity and normalcy present in the political and cultural discourse predominant in the Spanish state are not accompanied by a rigorous intellectual interrogation of those terms" (Delgado forthcoming). Since Azúa himself is steeped in European culture to a much greater degree than the vast majority of his contemporaries, one can only read his statements as clever parodies or as extreme examples of intellectual masochism.

Despite the attempt to reduce writers to the status of functionaries in an "Ideological State Apparatus" (to borrow a phrase from Louis Althusser), writers still depend to a large extent on the aura once associated with the idea of "Art" or "Literature."<sup>iv</sup> Without this prestige, after all, the state would have little use for literature in the first place. One can easily imagine the usefulness of a rather

unremarkable Spanish novel (written in the spirit of a Swiss gynecologist, needless to say) winning a prestigious European literary prize in Brussels or Venice. An award like this serves to reassure the political elite in Madrid that Spain is indeed a modern, European country. The problem, however, is that this prestige is based on a model of literature that has been explicitly rejected. How can modest political functionaries command the respect once accorded to visionary poets or intellectuals of the old school?

Poetry is ultimately more dependent than narrative on its aura of prestige. The novel is a commercial product as well as a repository of aesthetic value, but poetry stands or falls on its capacity to evoke the admiration of literary intellectuals. The shift in the writer's public role, from revolutionary outcast to state functionary, affects poetry with special severity. The main arguments used to justify a more mundane poetry, supposedly written for "normal" people, echo Azúa's explanation of the turn away from the experimental novel (García Montero, "Felipe Benítez Reyes"). The main difference between the genres, however, is that the novel is much better able to adapt to this shift. Many contemporary Spanish novels recount fairly ordinary plots in serviceable but unremarkable prose, with little or no emphasis placed on literary innovation. Poetry, in contrast, brings with it a higher level of expectation, in light of its greater dependence on prestige. Those seeking a satisfying but undemanding book are more likely to pick up a novel than a book of poems in the first place.

Since poets are less likely than novelists to receive income from the actual sales of their books, they are also more dependent on governmental and quasi-governmental sources of income, including money from literary prizes, lecture and reading fees, and



direct grants from foundations or institutions. Many of these poets also hold university or government appointments. According to a prominent Spanish poet who did not wish to be identified in this book, the combined income from such sources can be quite substantial for a poet in official favor. Official support for the arts in Spain is fairly generous, and the result is that poetry can be a quite lucrative career for anyone who is tapped into this pipeline.

These observations confirm once again Gamoneda's insight about the various institutional factors that converge to make a poet "popular." Since the market for poetry is so small in the first place, it does not take much to create the occasional small bubble effect. The promotion of José Hierro's Cuaderno de Nueva York, which recently became a poetry "best-seller" at more than 23,000 copies, is a case in point. The awarding of several important prizes, culminating in the Cervantes, allowed this already successful book to sell even more copies. Hierro, of course, was one of the most prominent poets of the first generation after the Civil War, and has no direct bearing on current controversies about the state of poetry. At the same time, however, his poetry does meet contemporary expectations of accessibility and "realism." What is relevant from my perspective is how the entire literary and journalistic world converged to celebrate his achievement.

The "poetry of experience," then, occupies a peculiar limbo: it rejects the modernist/avant-garde model of poetry, but also has difficulty providing the simple pleasures of the middle-brow novel. In the absence of either widespread popular support or the aura of prestige associated with the Great Moderns, this school has

chosen to align itself with powerful political and academic interests. Its goal is to achieve official status as a literary "generation." As any student of twentieth-century Spanish literature knows, a literary generation is an all-male group of writers designed with the purpose of defining an amorphous reality in an arbitrary, ideologically tendentious, yet seemingly objective way. By one measure, at least, the attempt to establish the "Poetry of Experience" as the "dominant" or "hegemonic" tendency of the 1980s and beyond has been successful: most anthologies devoted to the period are dominated by this school. What is striking from my perspective, though, is how inadequately these anthologies reflect the true vitality of contemporary Spanish poetry. The generational paradigm (ardently defended by the influential anthologist José Luis García Martín, among others) discriminates by age, by gender, and usually by ideology as well. Since a large proportion of the most interesting poetry of the 1980s and 1990s has been written by women or by poets who belong, chronologically, to earlier "generations," the nearly all-male generational anthologies that continue to be published are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

What of poets who do not belong to the dominant school? A glance at the contents of the first three issues of La Alegría de los Naufragios (1999-2001) reveals a line-up of poets from the 1950s (Gamoneda, Valente), novísimos (Pere Gimferrer, Guillermo Carnero, Jaime Siles, Ana María Moix, Antonio Colinas), and women whose poetry first appeared in the 1980s (Blanca Andreu, Amalia Iglesias, Lola Velasco, Julia Castillo), alongside sympathetic literary theorists and philosophers (Juan M. Cuesta Abad, Eugenio Trías, Isidoro Reguera), and the odd American Hispanist (Mayhew).<sup>v</sup> The

conception of poetry that emerges from the essays published in La Alegría de los Naufragios is derived primarily from German Romanticism, Heidegger, and the French avant-garde. What the journal represents, then, is essentially a Spanish version of late-modernist poetics, as exemplified by Valente and Gamoneda, the two poets featured most prominently in its pages.

The very existence of this counter-tendency might undermine the argument I have been making. It is true that many poets who are openly hostile to the "Poetry of Experience" have also published books, won prizes, and enjoyed success during this period. While popular in some literary and political circles, the supposedly dominant tendency has not been able to eliminate its rivals. The late-modernist conception of poetry represented by La Alegría de los Naufragios retains much of its aura, and for a very logical reason: this is the literary movement, after all, that is most heavily invested in traditional appeals to poetic prestige and the most resistant to the new model of the intellectual. If there is a certain predictability in the pages of this journal, this is the result of a coherent if not monolithic vision of the modern poetic tradition. Since I myself have published there, I cannot claim to be an impartial observer. My sympathies clearly lie with the vision of modern poetry promoted by the editors, César Antonio Molina and Amalia Iglesias Serna, and my reaction to the "Poetry of Experience" is the result of my personal stake in this debate.

Since the late-modernist paradigm has often been criticized for its elitism, it might be useful to point out that the particular sort of "cultural capital" represented by this form of high culture is not of much use to the state, if ever it was. The argument that

elite culture serves to shore up the power of the bourgeoisie was fashionable at one time, and still surfaces from time to time. The political elite in Spain, however, clearly prefers a more accessible brand of middle-brow culture that more closely mirrors its own cultural aspirations. Instead of pitting high culture against popular culture, as is customarily done, it might be helpful to think of a fierce rivalry between elite and "middle-brow" cultures. The high-brow culture of late modernism despises the facile, "light" culture of the political elites. Middle-brow culture, in turn, seeks to demystify or desacralize the mysteries of literary Modernism. Both of these cultures maintain a somewhat ambivalent relation to mass culture, though the harshest attacks on popular entertainment, in my experience at least, are more likely to come from insecure "middle-brow" critics than from elite intellectuals.

My perspective on contemporary Spanish poetry is controversial, to say the least.<sup>vi</sup> A critic wanting to make the case for the historical validity of the "Poetry of Experience," however, might tell a story similar to mine in many particulars. Without necessarily denying the ties between poetry and political power during this period, he or she might argue that institutional support of this poetry, such as it exists, is both legitimate and benign. After all, why should the new government not promote an image of Spanish culture that is in synchronization with its own vision of Spain's role in Europe? One could also point out that the cultural policies of the Spanish state have not been monolithic or consistent, and that institutional support, of various kinds, has been available for a wide range of enterprises.

As for the poets, their distrust of the avant-garde model of the intellectual is based

on their own experience of historical reality: one cannot ask them to follow a path that they feel is inauthentic. Furthermore, since the regimes from which they have benefited are not evil but merely corrupt to varying degrees, this form of official support for the arts is innocuous. From this perspective, even the shift away from the idea of the fiercely independent writer of the Goytisolo/Valente ilk might be seen as positive. This older model of the intellectual, after all, was the result of an unnatural political situation in which exile or internal opposition were the only legitimate options. Since Spain is now a democracy, there is no reason to be suspicious of writers and intellectuals who maintain a cosier relationship with the powers-that-be.

Without unnecessarily demonizing either the PSOE or the PP, it is still possible to question the desirability of such a close relationship between culture and state institutions. While beneficial in some respects, institutional support for the arts is not ideologically or aesthetically neutral. Even if one happens to approve of some of the poets writing under the rubric of the "Poetry of Experience," the existence of an "official verse culture" or "dominant tendency" cannot be healthy.<sup>vii</sup> It is not merely that the 'poetry of experience' enjoys an extraordinary degree of institutional support, but that its identity seems to be derived almost wholly from its semi-official status. It is naive, of course, to expect literature to exist wholly at the margins of institutions like newspapers and magazines, book publishers, universities and schools, academies, foundations, corporations, and governments, both regional and national. It should be pointed out that even poets opposed to the dominance of the "Poetry of Experience" write and publish in an institutional context: there is no unsullied space wholly apart from such

entities. The question is what sort of poetry stands the best chance of achieving success in this particular institutional context. The answer, in this case, is fairly obvious, at least to me: the "Poetry of Experience" has risen to prominence by presenting a narrative of triumphant normalization consonant with the Spanish political elite's self-image.

At the same time, however, this hegemonic poetic movement has been unable to dislodge the older model of the literary intellectual or to assure its own place in the literary canon. In a cultural environment in which literature itself is increasingly devalued, the poets with the best chance of survival are those who most strenuously resist the bureaucratic de-sacralization of their art.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Raquel Medina's an excellent 1998 article on the ideological conflict between rival schools of poetry in contemporary Spain. I have been particularly influenced by her observations on "la conversión de la poesía en un artículo de consumo para la clase política y la burguesía" (Medina 603).

<sup>ii</sup> My esteemed colleague Andrew P. Debicki is of the opinion that the poetry of the 1960s and 70s anticipates the open, democratic society of the 1980s: "For me, the stylistic revolution in poetry that should be linked to the new Spanish society had already occurred during the previous decade or two. The prior attacks on the view of literature as message, the new emphasis on linguistic creativity during the 1960s and its foregrounding in the 1970s, and the growing view of poetry as process had already shaken poetic styles out of old molds and thus had preceded social change. By 1980 the new state of mind that had made such shifts possible had been emerging for two decades and was fully in place among poets and readers' (Debicki, Twentieth Century Spanish Poetry, 182). If this is the case, it is hard to explain why 1980 marks a shift away from what Debicki likes to call "linguistic creativity" and an explicit attack on the supposed excesses of the novísimos. Where Debicki goes astray, in my view, is in his lack of attention to the larger cultural context. Spanish culture of the late-Francoist period was not the reflection of a society that did not yet exist, but of the intellectual and artistic ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. By the same token, the reaction against this culture reflects the desire on the part of many writers of the period to achieve success

within the new power structure. In fleeing from a seemingly reductive model of the relation between culture and society, Debicki loses sight of some fairly obvious connections.

iii While I sympathize with Subirats's overall perspective, his judgments are often so sweeping and dismissive that they lose a good part of their utility. One would like to know which intellectuals fall into this category, for example. At times, Subirats attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of Spanish intellectual life by pointing to the fact that his own ideas have not achieved acceptance in Spain.

iv I am not, in fact, analysing the function of literature in contemporary Spain in Althusserian terms, merely employing a term that seems particularly apt in this context.

v The women poets of the 1980s, by and large, have not taken part of the "poesía de la experiencia." The dominance of this school, then, perpetuates the idea that only men are the protagonists of literary history.

vi One of the best argued defenses of the "Poetry of Experience" that I have seen is Laura Scarano (2002), published in La Estafeta del Viento, a state-subsidized literary journal edited by Luis García Montero and Jesús García Sánchez. Echoing García Montero, but with a more sophisticated theoretical apparatus, Scarano argues that this poetry represents a progressively postmodern rejection of the avant-garde, and sees the demystification of poetic modernity in a wholly positive light. This position is certainly coherent on its own terms, but Scarano does not fully acknowledge the arguments of those of us who have criticized "Poetry of Experience," referring only to "la resistencia



de los círculos académicos a admitir una novedosa reflexión sobre los alcances de la posmodernidad artística en relación con las posibilidades de un nuevo realismo (noción altamente resistida en el género lírico y anatemizada por los profetas canónicos de la posmodernidad filosófica)" (29). No work critical of the "Poetry of Experience" appears in the bibliography of this otherwise thorough scholar.

<sup>vii</sup> I adopt the phrase "official verse culture" from the American "language" poet Charles Bernstein, whose perspective I have found especially useful. The phrase occurs throughout Bernstein's essays and interviews (Bernstein 65).